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ABSTRACT

As part of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1992, the National Center for Education Statistics published a separate study that focuses on the literacy skills of older adults (aged 60 years and older) from a variety of perspectives, such as age, sex, amount of education, race or ethnic background, income, and geographic region. Some of the findings are as follows: (1) at least 60 percent of the respondents scored low in literacy proficiency; (2) the older the respondents, the lower the proficiency level; (3) the most educated had the highest literacy scores; (4) the oldest adults were the most likely not to have earned a high school diploma or its equivalent; (5) older adults are more likely to volunteer their time and to vote than younger adults, and those who did so scored significantly higher in literacy proficiency; (6) older adults rely more heavily on newspapers, magazines, and television for information, whereas younger adults rely more on radio and other family members; (7) older adults are less likely to read or write letters or memos; and (8) the average proficiencies of older adults in the South were highest among the four geographic regions. (KC)

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Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Adult Literacy Fact Sheet

ED 408 431

LITERACY OF OLDER ADULTS IN AMERICA

As part of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1992, the National Center for Education Statistics has published a separate study that focuses on the literacy skills of older adults in the United States--people 60 years old and above. The report looks at the literacy skills of the population from a variety of perspectives, such as age, sex, amount of education, race or ethnic background, income, and geographic region of the country.

The results for this survey were reported in the same way as the survey done for adults below the age of 60. A quick reminder--adults received proficiency scores (0-500) for three categories, or scales, each representing a distinct aspect of literacy: *prose, document, and quantitative*. For each of those scales, five levels of proficiency were defined. Level 1 represents the lowest and Level 5 the highest achievement.

Prose literacy, for the purpose of this survey, is defined as "the skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction" (p. 3). Using such skills as inference, interpretation, locating information in a text are key to the prose sections of the survey. On the other hand, *Document literacy* refers to "the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in materials that include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs" (p. 3). *Quantitative literacy* refers to "the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials; for example, balancing a checkbook, figuring out a tip, completing an order form, or determining the amount of interest from a loan advertisement" (p. 3). Each of the participants in the survey was evaluated based on these three aspects of literacy.

Some interesting statistics from the survey:

Literacy Proficiencies in the Older Adult Population

- In each of the three literacy aspects, at least 68% of the respondents scored in the two lowest levels, with the worst being in the document literacy, where 80% of the respondents were in the two lowest levels.
- Generally speaking, the older the respondents, the more likely it was that they scored at a lower proficiency level (levels 1 or 2).
- When comparing literacy proficiencies by age, the older adults typically scored lower than the adults aged 16-59, and their proficiency levels average 48 points lower than the younger adults.

Education and Literacy

- In general, the more education that older adults had received, the higher their average literacy proficiency scores were. Accordingly, those older adults who had not earned a high school diploma had a much greater possibility of scoring in the lowest two levels than did either high school or college graduates.
- In general, the older the adults in the study, the less likely they were to have earned either a high school diploma or GED. 38% of 60-69-year-olds had not earned this credential, compared with 45% of 70-79-year-olds and 64% of adults age 80 and older. (Only 18% of 25-59-year-olds had not earned a high school diploma or GED.)

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- Older adults were much more likely to have stopped attending school because of financial problems or needing to work than were the youngest group of adults (16-59), who claimed losing interest as the most prevalent reason for not finishing school.

Civic Participation and Economic Status

- Older adults are more likely to volunteer their time than younger adults, and those older adults who do volunteer typically scored significantly higher on all three literacy aspects (on average 27 points higher).
- Older adults are much more likely to vote than are their younger counterparts--84% of older voters surveyed voted, while only 62% of the younger group voted.
- Those older adults who did vote scored significantly higher in the three literacy aspects (an average of 42 points higher) than those older adults who did not vote.
- On average, the more money that people make, the higher they scored on the three literacy aspects; the older people get, the less money they earn.
- Older adult males are much more likely to earn at least $20,000 a year than females in the same age range (64% to 44%); however, the gap is significantly narrowed with the younger adults (77% to 72%).

Literacy Practices

- Older adults are much less likely to use a public library on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis compared to the younger adults studied in the survey (19% to 39%).
- Older adults rely more heavily on newspapers, magazines, and television as sources of information, whereas younger adults place more reliance on radio and other family members.
- Older adults are more likely to watch a greater amount of television than are younger adults. In fact, 44% (vs. 29% of younger adults) watch 4 hours or more a day. In general, the older adults who watched a lot of TV had the lowest average profiency levels.
- Older adults are less likely to either read or write letters or memos than their younger counterparts. Further, the literacy proficiencies of those older adults who never read or write letters or memos averaged 45 points lower than the younger adults who never read or wrote letters or memos.
- The average proficiencies of older adults in the South were highest among the four geographical regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) in the Prose and Quantitative aspects, while the older adults in the West scored highest in the Document aspect.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Literacy of Older Adults in America: Results from the National Adult Literacy Survey*, NCES 97-576, by Helen Brown, Robert Prisuta, Bella Jacobs, and Anne Campbell. Washington, DC: 1996.

You may receive a free copy of the study, while supplies last, from the National Library of Education (E-mail: LIBRARY-NLE@ed.gov) or 1-800-424-1616. An executive summary of the 187 page report is available on the web at <www.ed.gov./NCES/nadlits/ElderSum.html> or by contacting the Ohio Literacy Resource Center.

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